

Faking to finish: Women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure to end unwanted sex

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Abstract

In this article, we explore women's accounts of consensual but unwanted sex, and how these accounts connect to feigning sexual pleasure. Interviews were conducted with 15 women and we employed a discursive analytic approach to examine the data. All women used discursive features (e.g. negation, hedging) to situate at least one of their past sexual experiences as problematic although all avoided the use of explicit labels such as rape or coercion. Furthermore, women commonly faked orgasm as a means to end these troubling sexual encounters. We argue the importance of considering women's accounts of 'problem' sex so these experiences are not dismissed.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, consent, faking orgasm, heterosex, women

Orgasm has been positioned as the 'be-all-and-end-all' (Potts, 2000: 61) of successful sex. It is the quintessential marker of sexual satisfaction (Fahs, 2011) and announces the triumphant finish of sex (Potts, 2000). As such, orgasm does not merely reflect embodied experience, but holds significant implications for both male

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and female sexuality. Positioned within a heterosexual (and phallogentric) economy, male orgasm is seen as inevitable while female orgasm is positioned as dependent on a man's work (Roberts et al., 1995). Thus, female orgasm validates male skill (Frith, 2013b) and denotes his 'sexpertise' (see Potts, 2002). Accordingly, it has been argued that sex is not 'a natural act' (Tiefer, 2004: 3), understood solely in relation to biological 'needs', but rather is enmeshed with social, cultural, economic, and political meanings (Braun et al., 2003; Gilfoyle et al., 1992) as well as gender relations to power (Fine, 1988). From a poststructuralist perspective, gender and sexuality are seen as constructed through language and discourse (Gavey, 1989; Jackson and Scott, 2007). As such, it is important to go beyond psychological frameworks that focus on the individual and to explore the cultural contexts and discourses in which sexual experiences are situated (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008).

Whereas female sexuality was once constructed as passive (Gill, 2008) and 'missing [a] discourse of desire' (Fine, 1988; Fine and McClelland, 2006), women have been recently positioned as active and desiring sexual subjects (Gill, 2008). Critical in this shift are postfeminist notions of freedom and choice (Gill, 2007). That is, individual choice is no longer tethered to 'the personal as political', but rather it is understood as operating independently and being unaffected by gendered power imbalances. However, scholars have expressed concern that the postfeminist sensibility's 'blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements' (e.g. Burkett and Hamilton, 2012: 829) paradoxically masks ongoing conformity to oppressive constructions of female sexuality. Sexual agency becomes compulsory as all choices are constructed as acts of free will. Thus, power imbalances are concealed in this repackaged construction where female sexuality continues to be understood predominantly in relation to male sexuality and ultimately to heterosexual intercourse or coitus (Nicolson and Burr, 2003).

The coital imperative posits that penetrative sex is the norm in heterosexual activity (Braun et al., 2003; Gavey et al., 1999). Dominant scripts of heterosex typically encompass a range of sexual activities, including the occurrence of female orgasm which is followed by male orgasm (Braun et al., 2003). This normative heterosexual sequence fashions intercourse-derived orgasm as the ultimate satisfying sexual experience where male orgasm marks the end of sex (i.e. the orgasmic imperative, Frith, 2013b, 2015; Potts, 2000). Within this coital imperative, women's pleasure has been reduced to achieving orgasm, despite women's own expressions of desire for multiple forms of sex, including expressions that orgasm are not central to sexual fulfillment (e.g. Nicolson and Burr, 2003). Thus, pleasure and orgasm are conflated as synonymous (Tiefer, 2004), often leaving other desires unacknowledged (Frith, 2015; Gilfoyle et al., 1992). Within the dominant conceptualizations of female sexual pleasure, female ecstasy must not only be evidenced by orgasm, but by a particular, culturally produced, version of orgasm that incorporates noise and physical performance (Potts, 2000; Roberts et al., 1995) in order to be considered 'real' (Jackson and Scott, 2007). Thus, given the strong meanings attached to orgasm, the experience of inorgasmia (absence of orgasm) can be

understood and experienced as both disturbing to the woman herself and her partner (Frith, 2013a; Lavie and Willig, 2005) as well as disruptive to the typical sequence of normative heterosex (Braun et al., 2003). The coalescence of coital and orgasmic imperatives, along with negative connotations associated with the absence of orgasm, promote the exaggeration and feigning of sexual pleasure and orgasm (Fahs, 2011, 2014; Frith, 2015). Faking orgasm, a common performance by *her* which validates *his* effort (Potts, 2002), is thus a viable solution to upholding hegemonic discourses without risking negative repercussions.

Faking orgasm: Prioritizing male pleasure

Most women fake orgasm at least some of the time (e.g. Fahs, 2014; Opperman et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 1995). Consistent with dominant discourses of heterosex in which male pleasure and satisfaction are prioritized (Frith, 2013b; Hayfield and Clarke, 2012), research on exaggerating sexual pleasure has demonstrated that women's reasons for faking orgasm are primarily concerned with maintaining the implicit rules of heterosex ('doing it for her partner': Opperman et al., 2014: 510). That is, faking orgasm can work in the interest of promoting a stable relationship in which his intervention leads to her orgasm and ultimately his satisfaction (Potts, 2000). Women report faking orgasm to protect their partners' feelings and to avoid injuring their sense of sexpertise (Fahs, 2014; Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Roberts et al., 1995), and because their partner was unskilled and thus orgasm was unlikely (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Opperman et al., 2014). Additionally, some women report faking orgasm to end a sexual encounter because of boredom or fatigue (Fahs, 2011; Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010). Indeed, women have been found to be more concerned with achieving orgasm to please their partners than for their own sexual enjoyment (Fahs, 2011; Nicolson and Burr, 2003). In the context of gendered discourses of sexual performance that privilege male pleasure, faking orgasm can be seen as emotional labour where 'faking orgasm becomes a practice of emotion management' (Frith, 2015: 112). In this way, women's experiences of faking orgasm (regardless of their own desires) can be read as doing 'emotion work' in order to preserve their (male) partner's feelings and satisfy his desires (Frith, 2015).

Jagose offers an alternative to this view of faking orgasm as distant and at odds with one's actual experience of pleasure. Instead, she situates orgasm as an 'inventive bodily technique' (2010: 529) that is political, agentic and perhaps even pleasurable. If orgasm is a symbol of the heterosexual exchange in which men work to give women orgasms, then faking orgasm may be a site of resistance to this dominant practice (Frith, 2015). Faking orgasm in this way can be seen as 'political without (most likely) having political intentionality and as agentic without *therefore* being empowering' (Gavey, 2012: 720). The simultaneous positioning of (fake) orgasms as emotional labour and as an agentic practice trouble the taken-for-granted understandings of female sexual desire, pleasure, and consent in heterosex.

Consent and wantedness

The dominant model of sexual wanting conceptualizes sex as either consensual and wanted, or nonconsensual and unwanted (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007). This binary leaves no room for ambivalence between the two (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005), resulting in the conceptual impossibility of experiences of 'nonconsensual wanted sex' and 'consensual unwanted sex' (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007). To address this problem, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) adopted a quadrant approach in which consenting and wanting are understood as distinct, albeit interacting dimensions. This framework was developed as a solution to acknowledge a wider range of sexual experiences that do not necessarily meet the classifications for enthusiastically consensual (and wanted) sex nor sexual assault. However, within this model, consent remains the marker for what is considered to be acceptable sex and consensual but unwanted sex is labelled as 'not rape'. Thus, although desire (or wantedness) is no longer missing in this model (see Fine, 1988), we assert that the prioritization of consent remains problematic given that consenting to unwanted sex is a common experience among women and one that is often accompanied by negative psychological effects (e.g. O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; Walker, 1997).

There are many good reasons for engaging in unwanted sex. Acquiescence may be easier and safer than refusal (Hayfield and Clarke, 2012), at least in part because direct refusals are not culturally normative in conversation (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). In addition, consenting to unwanted sex is connected to the expectation that intercourse should happen (e.g. Hayfield and Clarke, 2012; O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; Walker, 1997) with women reporting consenting to unwanted sex for reasons similar to faking orgasm. For example, women report consenting to unwanted sex to maintain relationships (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008). In this context, a partner's needs are satisfied (Walker, 1997) and interpersonal tension or violence is avoided (O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998). Yet, although not 'rape' in the legal sense, experiences of consensual but unwanted sex may have negative psychological and physiological effects, including women's difficulties to articulate and make sense of these problematic experiences. The exclusive emphasis on consent as the measure of violation may mask ongoing subordination and unequal power relations (Baker, 2008) as women's participation in unwanted sex is then positioned as an active choice based on individual desire free from relational and societal pressures. If we focus exclusively on consent as the marker for acceptable sex, we ignore the important factor of (non)desire (e.g. Gavey, 1992). As a result, a range of troubling sexual experiences are eclipsed from view and rendered unintelligible.

Current research

The analysis presented in this article was developed from research originally aimed at exploring women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure (Stelzl and LaFrance, 2011; 2012). After hearing women's repeated expressions of distress in these interviews, and contemplating the important distinction between consenting

and wanting, we revisited the data to see if women drew on these distinctions when talking about exaggerating sexual pleasure and faking orgasm. Without exception, participants alluded to or spoke explicitly of at least one unwanted and/or unpleasurable sexual experience despite having been recruited to talk about 'consensual sex'. Within these accounts, we were struck by the degree to which participants were connecting, and often troubling, the practice of faking orgasm to accounts of unwanted sex. While some talked about faking orgasm in positive ways, for instance, as a pleasurable experience that heightened their own arousal, many talked about feigning pleasure in the context of unwanted and unpleasurable sexual experiences. In this article, we explore unwanted and/or unpleasurable sex as a site in which women's accounts of faking orgasm emerged. Although researchers have explored the reasons why women fake orgasm, the literature is scarce concerning faking orgasm as a means to ending sex that is unwanted. As such, we focus on the ways in which women talk about these experiences that are neither explicitly labelled as coercive nor as sexual assault, but nonetheless, are identified as problematic. As interviewers and allies, we heard women's struggles to express and articulate 'what happened' in the absence of adequate social vocabularies. These struggles in meaning making became the focus of our inquiry.

Notably, we ourselves struggled to locate adequate language to talk about such troublesome experiences. These accounts were often uncomfortable or distressing for participants to discuss, and disconcerting for us to hear, but lacked the appropriate language for their clear expression. We considered the term 'bad' sex, but this did not do justice to the violation some described. The term 'consensual but unwanted' seemed unwieldy and 'unwanted' did not capture the fluidity of desire expressed in some accounts. Indeed, in our informal discussions throughout the research process, we invented and used the term 'gak' sex to refer to these instances in the text. When faced with writing the research for publication, and after much discussion, we settled on the imperfect term of 'problem' sex to refer to all accounts of sex that participants did not describe as enthusiastically consensual and wanted. The limits and possibilities of this language choice are discussed later in this article.

Method

Participants in the original study were 15 female undergraduate students of a liberal arts university in Canada. Participants were largely from a semi-rural area of eastern Canada and ranged in age from 19 to 28 years ($M=21.53$, $SD=2.88$). Of the participants, 12 self-identified as 'heterosexual' or 'straight', one as 'lesbian', one as 'bisexual' and one as 'heterosexual/bi-curious'. The interviews of all 15 participants were analysed, however, the analysis emerged as only relevant to participants' accounts of heterosex. That is, while women talked about both having unwanted sex with women, and faking orgasm in the context of sex with women, the discursive features that emerged as central in our analysis did not appear in these accounts. Thus, the resulting analysis speaks only to the accounts of 14 participants in which they talked about sex with men.

Participants were recruited based on having engaged in consensual sexual intercourse and having been sexually active for at least one year. The study was advertised as research on women's talk about consensual sex and pleasure through flyers posted around the university campus and in the student newspaper. Two of the three authors conducted the interviews in a one-on-one setting. The interviews were semi-structured around the themes of talking about sex, faking orgasm, and resisting feigning sexual pleasure. After obtaining participants' consent, each interview was audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim (see Appendix 1). At the conclusion of the interview, participants were debriefed, both verbally and in a written form, which included contact information for counselling services.

We used discourse analysis to explore how women negotiate and account for experiences of 'problem' sex in the context of exaggerating sexual pleasure and faking orgasm. Wood and Kroger's (2000) model of discourse analysis guided the approach. This framework encourages repeated examination of the data where careful identification of key features of talk is one of the core components.

In our initial coding of the data, we extracted all sections of the interview transcripts in which participants talked about sex that was not clearly identified as both consensual and wanted. This master file was then read and reread multiple times, attending to the discursive features and effects of participants' talk. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to what the participants said, how it was said, and what were the functions of their accounts (i.e. 'what talk is doing and achieving', Wood and Kroger, 2000: 5). We worked together closely to develop the analysis, discussing our ideas and the emergent analysis as it unfolded. That is, we immersed ourselves in analysis individually and as a group. Once an 'analytic lead' was identified (e.g. I think there is the repeated use of hedging in the interviews), one person would take primary responsibility for tracking it through the data (e.g. How often does a hedging appear in the master file? Which participants do and do not use it? In which contexts does it appear or not?). A separate file or 'code' was made for each emergent pattern of accounting, and we met regularly to discuss the viability of each code and how they related to one another across the data. Throughout this process, we explored if and how participants made distinctions between consent and desire when talking about exaggerating sexual pleasure and faking orgasm, and how they negotiated these experiences of 'problem' sex in their interactions with their partners.

Our analysis explores the discursive tools participants drew on in their accounts of 'problem' sex as well as the connections they made between (non)desire and faking sexual pleasure. In the first section, we analyse the available language that participants did (and did not) use to trouble unwanted sexual experiences. We then explore participants' use of negative evaluations ('it was bad') in accounting for 'problem' sex. The following section examines participants' mobilization of various hedging and mitigating techniques, including negations ('it wasn't good'), disclaimers ('it wasn't non-consensual but...'), and modifiers ('kind of forcing me'). Finally, we explore the ways in which participants connected faking orgasm to

ending sex that was unwanted and/or unpleasurable. Throughout the analysis, we highlight participants' attempts to make meaning in the absence of adequate vocabularies to construct 'problem' sex.

Analysis and discussion

The data were analysed to explore the terms used (and not used) to refer to participants' unwanted sexual experiences. Participants never used words such as 'rape' or 'coercion' to reference their own experiences, despite their descriptions of events that could clearly be categorized as such. There were two instances in the text in which such clear and direct language was used ('rape' (Kat), 'coerce' (Morgan)). In both instances, these terms were used in the context of describing *other* women's experiences:

[Sister] was talking to one of her friends from high school and she was saying 'yeah, one night I was really really drunk an::d, yeah this guy just like forced himself on me an:d he: had sex with me and I didn't really want to' and she was like 'well that's rape you know, like, you should tell someone about that' (Kat)

I remember this one night, I woke up to go to the bathroom, and I was sleeping with my Mom and my Dad? So, I remember coming ba::ck, an:d my Dad was trying to: coerce my Mom into having se::x, and my Mom saying, 'no, no, no, no'. Like, like I: do. And then, I got kicked out of the roo:m (Morgan)

While the language of coercion or rape was used to refer to *other* women's experiences, participants used less clear language to point to their own. For instance, Kat used the word 'borderline' to describe an incident with her ex-boyfriend in which she faked being sick to escape the sexual encounter. She said, 'that was kind of like? It was kind of like a borderline:: 'that wasn't okay I didn't want to do that' situation.' What 'borderline' is being referenced is left unstated, but her account does work to situate sex as 'not okay' and as something that she 'didn't want to do'. At the same time, her account is hedged, marked by the repetition of 'kind of like' and the rising inflection of a question in her evaluation of the situation ('that was kind of like?'). Thus, Kat situates this episode as unwanted and problematic, but appears to struggle with providing a clear term for it.

Notably, whereas the two instances in which participants named other's experiences as rape or coercion were presented in direct and unqualified ways ('that's rape you know' (Kat), 'my Dad was trying to: coerce my Mom into having se::x' (Morgan)), all references to participants' own potentially problematic experiences involved discursive features that at once worked to situate it as problematic while also hedging, minimizing, or deflecting conclusions of sexual assault. In the sections that follow, we explore the ways in which participants described 'problem' sex and the implications of these ways of accounting.

'It was bad': The use of negative evaluations

Although participants did not draw on the language of rape or coercion to describe 'problem' sex, they nonetheless made attempts to problematize it by drawing on explicitly negative evaluative terms. Participants routinely described such encounters as 'terrible' (Jem, May), 'horrible' (Kat, Heather, Morgan), 'bad' (Heather, May, Laura), 'awful' (X, Hayden, Laura), and 'negative' (X, Hayden, Laura). For instance, May and Laura draw on negative evaluations ('terrible' and 'bad') to trouble sex in the following accounts:

We started making out, fondling all that stuff and then he went down on me and it was terrible! It was so:: ba(hh)d! And I just wanted it to stop so I:: pretended that I had cu::m and. . . after a while like, he was all over the place, it was just like- sloppy, and wet and gross a:n:d it- it was so:: bad! ((laughing)). (May)

I was like '[boyfriend's name] like I can't do it like, it hurts too mu:ch' and he's just like 'You're bein' a baby' like 'You always, you always have yeast infections' [. . .] and then he would get really mad at me an, [. . .] like wouldn't talk to me and he did this thing where he like shook his leg like this ((shakes leg)) until I would h(hh)ave s(hh)ex with him and it was ba:d but I know that's not the poi(hh)nt o(hh)f the study, so [. . .] like I was becoming really upset about it a- li- internally like, I was: really messed up from it. (Laura)

In the foregoing extracts, participants referred to their sexual experiences as negative – as 'terrible' and 'bad'. However, we noted that participants routinely used these same negative terms to construct a wide range of situations. That is, the same language was used to describe both desired but unsatisfactory sex as well as unwanted and coercive sex. For example, in the first excerpt, May related a story in which she engaged in oral sex with a friend that she previously 'had a couple of flings' with and whom she described as a 'fantastic kisser'. Despite her desire, however, she depicted oral sex with him as 'terrible' and 'bad'. Her repeated emphasis on words such as 'bad', 'gross', and 'sloppy' situate her experience as unsatisfactory and problematic.

In the second excerpt, Laura also employed the term 'bad' to describe a negative sexual experience. In contrast to May's use of the term 'bad' to describe wanted but ultimately unsatisfying sex, Laura used it to describe a situation in which her partner coerced her to engage in unwanted and painful sex. Although Laura did not draw on language of rape or coercion, she did later acknowledge that her story was 'not the point of the study', which was to explore accounts of consensual sex. Furthermore, she troubled this experience by relating the negative impact that this had on her physical ('it hurts too much') and emotional well-being ('I was really messed up from it'). While we are encouraged by participants' ability to locate such sexual experiences as 'bad', this language appears to be applied so broadly, that the urgency of the trouble they point to is easily left unheard and unaddressed. Whereas Gavey (2005) has argued that the cultural scaffolding of sex frequently

positions rape as ‘just sex’, here we hear women’s efforts to trouble their experiences of unwanted sex. And yet, again, given the limitations of the language available, their expressions of resistance risk being similarly unheard as ‘just (bad) sex’. More concerning still is that most often, participants did not draw on direct negative evaluations to construct their experiences, but relied on linguistic mitigating techniques, such as hedging, to negotiate such accounts.

Hedging

In this section we explore instances in which participants used various hedging techniques to negotiate accounts of ‘problem’ sex. Hedges are linguistic devices that work to qualify and minimize utterances ‘in order to reduce the riskiness of what one says’ (Wales, 2014: 197). That is, hedges imply that a statement is provisional and that there is an alternative to what is being said (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Often, hedges serve communication purposes such as vagueness, mitigation (Schröder and Zimmer, 1997), and protection of the speaker from an addressee’s potential negative reaction (Markannen and Schröder, 1997).

We noted the prevalence of hedging in participants’ talk of ‘problem’ sex and identified what claims are being hedged and how this is achieved. In particular, we examined participants’ use of negations (e.g. ‘not’ good), disclaimer language (i.e. defending against an unwanted conclusion), and modifiers (e.g. ‘kind of’) in efforts to trouble unwanted and unpleasurable sexual experiences.

Negation: Describing sex as ‘not’ positive

One common feature of participants’ talk was to situate ‘problem’ sex as ‘not’ positive, good, or desirable. That is, they negated positive evaluations (e.g. ‘not good’) as opposed to using the opposite (and more direct) negative term (e.g. ‘bad’). Whereas participants sometimes used direct negative language (as described earlier), more commonly, they described unpleasurable and/or unwanted sex in the following manner:

It [sex] wasn’t fun, I just. . . passed the time, like it wa- I was doing it just to make him happy. (Heather)

Have I faked it during, during that? Y:es because it gets to the point where over stimulation does n:o:t feel good. (Adison)

I didn’t really fee:l anything that was even remotely good [. . .] So, I would let o:n that I enjoyed it. (Hayden)

As these excerpts demonstrate, when participants depicted ‘problem’ sex, they often did so by describing what it was not (e.g. good, (Jem, Adison, Heather, Lily, Meg, X, Hayden, Laura), great (Jem, Adison, X), enjoyable (Adison, Kat),

pleasurable (Adison), or fun (Heather)). In contrast to instances in which participants used direct negative evaluations to trouble sex (described earlier), these negated positive evaluations provide a less clear and less extreme account (see Giora et al., 2010). As such, the speakers' accounts are open to interpretation and the listener must then work to draw conclusions about how to evaluate the encounters described (If sex was not good, how 'bad' was it?). Thus, participants' accounts worked to trouble their sexual encounters, but in an indirect and somewhat unclear way.

Participants' evaluations of sex as 'not good' were often further softened or hedged through the repeated use of rising inflection. That is, troubled evaluations of sexual encounters were regularly delivered, not as declarations, but as questions:

I would react to whatever he was doing: in a positive way? Even if it didn't necessarily... feel: super good? (Laura)

There was one ti:m:e that I can think of...tha::t it was good for him but it wasn't good for me:? And I just didn't feel anythin::g, I couldn't get o:ff, and he, you know, finished and he thought it was fine? But, then I was, I was physically upset. (Meg)

Yeah, I just remember one time that, he was really... n::ot there, I guess. And- well, I guess, and I wasn't there, was the problem, but he::, I- we were so:: disconnected. Um:, I was really not feeling it, we were ha:ving sex anyway, and I was so upset that I was... s- for me::, obviously, not interested? (X)

The use of rising inflections marks uncertainty in accounts and can weaken claims. In several accounts (such as Laura's), negated positive evaluations and rising inflections were used to describe desired but unsatisfying sex ('it didn't... feel super good?'). In many others (such as Meg's and X's), however, these same discursive features were used to describe sex that left women distressed and upset. Thus, just as with the use of negative markers to describe 'problem' sex ('it was bad'), these hedged accounts also have the effect of blurring distinctions between desired/unsatisfying sex and unwanted sex.

Disclaimer language

In addition to the use of negation, it was also common for participants to hedge 'problem' sex with the use of disclaimers. We use the term disclaimer to refer to efforts to prevent the misunderstanding of a claim. These statements were often hinged with a conjunction (e.g. 'but') and were framed within an 'it's not like it was "x", but it was "y"' format. This way of accounting worked to differentiate their experiences from non-consensual or coercive sex yet it troubled them nonetheless. For example, in the extracts that follow, both Red and Morgan disclaim against the interpretation that sex was non-consensual. However, they still situate it as

problematic in that it was unwanted. In the following account, Red spoke of ‘agreeing’ to have sex with her partner despite ‘not being into it’:

There have been times where [...] I didn’t really fee:l like doing anything, not really in the mood but I- I did a::nyway just because it was something nice to do for my partner- I mean it wasn’t like nonconsensual, [...] I totally agreed with it and it was still nice, but you know [...] I wasn’t really into it. (Red)

Similarly, Morgan described ‘complaining’ to a girlfriend about ‘giving in’ to sex with her boyfriend:

It’s not like- It’s not un::- What’s the word I’m looking for? Consensual. It’s not- It’s- I am giving consent but, you know, it’s, sometimes I don’t wanna do it [...] and he wants to so, I call her:: an. you know, complain, and she just listens [...] I called her, ‘cause the night before, he wanted ta have sex and I didn’t want to an I di- I gave in, and then I called her the next morning and said, ‘Oh:. [Boyfriend’s name], I hate hi::m.’ (Morgan)

In the foregoing excerpts, participants drew clear distinctions between consenting and wanting. The conjunction ‘but’ serves as a contrast marker, announcing that ‘what comes next is in opposition to what has been said previously’ (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 40). By clearly contrasting consent and non-desire, Red and Morgan are able to relay an experience that falls outside of the traditional dichotomous classification of sex as either consensual/wanted or nonconsensual/unwanted (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007). As such, the disclaimer works to trouble an experience that was reportedly consensual yet nonetheless undesired.

Notably, whereas disclaimers were sometimes followed by oppositional clauses, which served to qualify or clarify the initial statement (e.g. ‘I am giving consent [...] but I don’t wanna do it’), participants frequently struggled to offer alternatives. In many instances, participants disclaimed against negative interpretations of their sexual experiences, but in their efforts to more clearly describe them, ended up offering synonyms or indeed, reinstating their initial appraisal. In the following excerpt, Laura disclaims against the understanding that her boyfriend would ‘make’ her have sex. However, she follows up this disclaimer with an equivalent claim that he ‘pressured [her]’ into having sex with him. Laura said: ‘I was starting to get really depressed about it a:nd u::m, he would, I don’t like to use the word make but, pressure me into having sex with him while I still ha- while I had a yeast infection’. Morgan also disclaimed against having her boyfriend’s actions interpreted as pressure, but ended up rescinding her disclaimer. She said: ‘It’s not pre:ssure, I- Maybe it is pressure.’

We noted several instances in which participants disclaimed sex as trouble (i.e. said what it was not), but appeared unable to articulate what it was. Instead, their accounts trailed off into silence. For example, in response to being asked about times in which she has exaggerated sexual pleasure, Heather described enduring unwanted and unpleasurable sex with her boyfriend. Following this description,

she offered disclaimers but these are left hanging without alternative explanations ('he wasn't a fiend or anything, it was just like, I don't know um'; 'not to shut up him up but, yeah').

Heather: And he wasn't like a fiend or anything, it was just like, ((sharp intake of breath)) I don't know, um. But anyway, I: I guess I'd pretend I was having fun? I wouldn't actually necessarily like fa:ke or anything but, I might like throw in a mo:an or... a fake smile or something and I was just like, 'I: don't want to do this', so.[...] Yeah no, he w 'cause I was just like, 'let's just go to bed' and he was just like 'no no no' and so I was just, I guess, not to shut up him up but, yeah.

I: To make it stop.

Heather: ((quietly while exhaling)) Yea(hh)h.

I: Okay, to make it stop. Yeah, that makes sense to me.

Heather: But it was all like consensual, like it wasn't anything

Participants' unfinished sentences and trailing off powerfully highlight their struggle to convey troubling experience. The use of vague (e.g. 'not to shut him up but, yeah.') and uncertain (e.g. 'I don't know') language marks these accounts as difficult to explain as there is seemingly no discursive alternative to the claims being made. That is, participants articulated what sex *was not*, however they struggled to find the language to communicate what it *was*.

Modifiers

Participants further mitigated accounts of 'problem' sex with speech marked by modifying words. A 'modifier' refers to words that deny an utterance its full illocutionary force and introduce vagueness (Markkanen and Schröder, 1997). Some examples of modifying words that were commonly articulated by participants include 'kind of', 'sort of', 'almost', and 'just'.

In analysing what was being hedged, we noted that it was common for participants to pair modifying words with expressions of (non)desire ('if I didn't wanna do it we did it anyways sort of thing' (Laura)), displeasure ('I kinda don't enjoy this anymore' (Kat)), coercion ('he was kind of forcing things on me' (Kat)), sexual compliance ('I just kind of put up with it' (Hayden)), sex that happened without clear consent ('[sex] kind of happened when it happened' (JoAnne)), and wanting sex to end ('I just kind of wanted it to end?' (Lily)). Notably, every participant in the study at some point described unwanted sexual experiences and each of these in turn were marked with modifiers. For example, Jem ends a troubled account of unwanted sex with a modifier:

I think.... most times it [exaggerating pleasure] happened it was...because I wasn't really into it? but I could see: that he was, and so: I wou:ld. I would agree: to

have sex or: to do something t-but I wasn't necessarily, like, uh I wanted it, it was just, 'he wants it, I love him, okay, we'll do it,' a:nd I would just, not fa:ke anything? But just...it wouldn't be as good for me as for him and, may-, if he were to ask I would just say, 'yeah it was good' and I'd just kind of leave it at that kind of thing. (Jem)

Jem's use of modifiers ('kind of', 'kind of thing') works to negotiate her account of unwanted but consensual sex. Her account also illustrates the interaction between multiple discursive tools (i.e. negation, disclaimer language, modifying words) that worked together across participants' accounts to trouble sex. This linguistic negotiation ultimately points to her lack of desire and enthusiasm to engage in sex with her partner. Although she claimed not to fake in this particular excerpt, she did later tie a lack of desire to exaggerating pleasure as she stated: 'I just let o:n...sometimes when I'm not as into it'. Similar to Jem's account, all but one participant spoke of a lack of desire in relation to exaggerating sexual pleasure or faking orgasm (or in Kat's case faking sickness) as a means to ending an unwanted sexual encounter.

Faking to end (unwanted) sex

This analysis has highlighted the discursive ways in which women trouble sex that was consensual, but unwanted. However, in the absence of available language, women struggled to story these experiences and make them intelligible to themselves and to their partners. As a result, faking orgasm emerged as a reasonable solution to end 'problem' sex and women's accounts of this were remarkably common across the data. While at times participants did talk about faking orgasm as pleasurable and arousing, here we focus on instances of 'problem' sex. In these descriptions, participants repeatedly used (and emphasized) the words 'over' (Heather, Lily, May, X, Laura, JoAnne), 'finish' (Alberta, Adison, X, Laura), 'done' (Kat, X, Laura, JoAnne), 'end' (Adison, Lily), and 'stop' (May). The following are just a few examples of the ways in which they talked about these encounters:

I just kind of wanted it to e::nd. (Lily)

I'm gonna fake it right now and let him finish, just ta end this. (Adison)

Let's just get this over with. (Heather)

I just wanted it to hurry up and be done. (Laura)

I just wanted the damn thing over w(hh)ith. (May)

Common across these instances was participants' emphasis on their ultimate goal of terminating sex. Across the transcripts, participants noted how their performed pleasure served to 'hurry up' (X, Laura) the process, make it go 'faster' (Morgan, Laura) or 'quicker' (Alberta) so that they could go 'back to sleep'

(Morgan, JoAnne), leave ('I wanna go', X), or get on with other tasks ('I have thousands of things to do', Alberta). X's account captures several of these common discursive features. She said: 'Anytime I've ever exaggerated? It's because I want it to hurry up and get over with. So if you exaggerate? He's more likely to climax and you can be done.' Implicit in these accounts is the standard assumption that (male) orgasm signals the end of heterosex (Potts, 2000). Given this apparently pervasive understanding, women's performed (if not embodied) orgasms have the effect of meeting their needs to end sex while upholding dominant discourse of heterosex by facilitating men's orgasms. Notably, participants rarely oriented around other ways of ending sex, and often rejected other options when they were presented. For example, in another section of the interview with X, the interviewer prompted her to consider ending sex without faking orgasm:

X: For me, like I said, the end result was just, let's get this over with and the fastest way I can get this over with is t- for him to think that I had an orgasm? So he'll have one? And we can be done. Um::

I: *Right. To play the devil's advocate for a second, a fast way- a faster way would be to say, yeah, no, let's:-*

X: Yea::h hhh. I guess so... I do- I don't know if I could just stop mid(hh)-w(hh)ay thro(hh)ugh, I re(hh)ally do(hh)n't.

I: *Yeah*

X: I think that would just be, almost too awkward? Like, at least if you can- if he can finish, then you can just get up and leave and kinda go do whatever you have to do, or: whatever, whereas... if ya did just sorta stop part way through and say, 'you know what? This isn't working, and I'm do::ne'?

I: *Right*

X: I think that's gonna lead into a discussion that maybe necessarily I don't wanna ha::ve::? Or:::. I don't know, I guess I take the easy way out? If that- pardon the pun, but, um:.

I: *((laughing))*

X: It, uh. Yeah, to just sorta- to help him finish? Means that I could just walk away.

As indicated by X's response, the interviewer's suggestion that she could end sex directly appears inconceivable. She replies that it is possible ('I guess so...') but improbable given her inability to imagine stopping sex 'midway' (that is, before his orgasm). She concludes that this course of action would be 'too awkward'. In contrast, her solution to fake orgasm to end sex allows her to 'just get up and

leave.’ She typifies this as ‘the easy way out’ that avoids disrupting hegemonic discourses of heterosex and any subsequent unwanted ‘discussion’.

Similarly to how participants used the same language to describe a wide range of experiences (from sex that was unsatisfying to sex that was unwanted and/or painful), participants described faking orgasm as a means to avoid a disruption of dominant sex scripts (as in X’s example) but also to end more troublesome situations. For example, both Morgan and Laura talked about faking orgasm to end sex that they described as unwanted or painful.

I fi::nd that if I’m just laying: there and he kno::ws I’m not enjoying it? It’ll take longer. So:: you know, for me:: to make it go fa::ster:, I- That’s so horr:::(hh)ible.
(Morgan)

Whe:n . . . we’re having sex a:nd I was on- er- and I had a yeast infection, sometimes I would pretend as hard as I could that it wasn’t really hurting me. . . just so that. . . he could finish, because: he couldn’t, it took him longer if he thought I was in pain.
(Laura)

Morgan describes engaging in sex that she clearly does not want or enjoy (‘I’m just laying: there’), but which continues despite both parties acknowledgement of this fact (‘and he kno::ws I’m not enjoying it’). Laura describes ‘really hurting’ during sex, and similarly notes that her partner’s knowledge of her pain would only delay (but not stop) the process (‘it took him longer if he thought I was in pain’). Consistent with other accounts (and dominant discourses of heterosex), neither speaker considers that sex could end in any way other than male orgasm. Where actively voicing pain and lack of desire may not be an available option, women described attempts to speed the process toward its necessary end (‘so that . . . he could finish’) by feigning sexual pleasure. Indeed, participants repeatedly used the word ‘finish’ to refer to male orgasm such that ‘male orgasm’ and ‘end of sex’ have become synonymous. In this way, women’s ability to express the desire to end a sexual encounter outside of this prescribed ‘ending’ is effectively restrained both discursively as well as materially.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored the ways in which women account for ‘problem’ sex and the links they made between these accounts and faking orgasm. In summary, participants mobilized several discursive features to trouble sex that was consensual but unwanted. They used negative evaluations (it was bad sex), as well as a range of hedging devices including negations (it was not good), disclaimers (it wasn’t non-consensual but. . .), and modifiers (kind of forcing me). While such features of talk may be readily dismissed, we heard them as attempts at meaning making in the absence of adequate vocabularies. Dominant discourses fail to ‘speak to’ women’s unwanted sexual experiences beyond legalized terms of rape and coercion. As such,

women are left having to attempt to speak out and around these recognized terms. This finding is consistent with Marjorie DeVault's assertion that 'language itself serves male experience and that its categories are often incongruent with women's lives' (1990: 96). As a result, 'women who want to talk of their experience must "translate", either saying things that are not quite right' (1990: 97), or 'saying part of what is experienced, groping for words, doing the best one can' (1990: 102). The goal of this analysis was to explore these patterns of accounting and honour the linguistic ingenuity of these women who negotiated the paucity of available language for constructing consensual but unwanted sex.

At the same time as we recognize women's efforts to speak their experiences into being, we are mindful of the problems inherent in the discursive resources available for them to mobilize. As demonstrated in the analysis, participants used the same discursive structures to describe a wide range of experiences, from sex that was wanted yet unsatisfying, to sex that was unwanted, unpleasant and often painful. The absence of clear referents to problematic sex serves to blur understandings of negative experiences of sex. When wanted and consensual yet disappointing/unsatisfying, sex is talked about in the same manner as experiences of unwanted and/or coercive sex and sexual assault, unwanted experiences may be at risk of being passed off as simply not pleasurable. Within dominant constructions of sexual assault, which dichotomize sex as either consensual and wanted or nonconsensual and unwanted (rape), all other experiences that do not meet either definition may be dismissed as 'just (bad) sex' (see Gavey, 2005).

Furthermore, while exaggerating sexual pleasure or faking orgasm may work to end 'bad' sex, it also upholds and reproduces the dominant and damaging discourses of heterosex. In this way, faking orgasm can be regarded as a form of 'embodied hedging' as it avoids the consequences that may come from a direct refusal to sex all the while allowing the woman to determine when the sexual encounter ends. Thus, we argue that feigning sexual pleasure is both problematic and helpful at the same time. On an individual level, faking orgasm may be a useful strategy insofar as it may afford some control over ending a sexual encounter. In fact, in contexts of potential violence, faking may be the only viable solution to end an unwanted sexual encounter without disrupting normative sex scripts and thus inciting anger in one's partner. As such, faking orgasm is a discursive strategy for dealing with 'problem' sex where sufficient language does not exist to name and legitimize women's experiences as a problem that warrants direct resistance. On a societal level, however, faking orgasm may operate in collusion with dominant discourses of heterosex, leaving these uninterrupted. Research on faking orgasm continues to demonstrate that fake orgasms are more about satisfying partners' needs than satisfying their own desires (e.g. Fahs, 2014). We are not criticizing faking practice on an individual level but rather we are calling to puncture the established parameters of heterosex for a social reconceptualization that acknowledges, names and confronts the problems women spoke of in our interviews. Here we draw on Beres et al. (2014) who have emphasized the value of highlighting what constitutes 'good' sex. Education efforts need to go beyond 'stopping the worst of

bad sex' (Beres et al., 2014: 774) and to engage in a public restorying not only of what good sex *looks and sounds* like, but also what it *feels* like.

As feminists, teachers, and activists, we would have liked to hear the women in our study describe more assertive solutions that reflect their embodied desires and meet their needs in a mutually respectful way. However, as we identified earlier in this article, we ourselves struggled with locating adequate and appropriate language in talking with each other about the women's negative experiences that they did not describe explicitly as coercive or as rape. Although we adopt the term 'problem' sex as an attempt to capture a wider range of negative sexual experiences, we recognize that 'new' terms do not entirely liberate language as they are taken up in the context of existing heteronormative and patriarchal social relations (see DeVault, 2014). Therefore, while a gap in the language remains a critical agenda for social change (Gavey, 2005), it may be useful to move beyond the existing limiting and dichotomous conceptualizations of heterosex. Future research exploring women's attempts to construct 'problem' sex is needed to develop more useful discursive resources that 'speak' to women's lived experiences and name injustices. A significant limitation of the current study was the narrow range of experiences represented. Hence, research with older women, women who have been in longer-term relationships, and women of more diverse backgrounds in terms of sexual orientations, as well as cultural and ethnic backgrounds, is critically needed. Through such continued inquiry, we may create alternative spaces for meaning making beyond dominant discourses (McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance, 2014). It is clear that women are using available language in creative ways to speak up and out beyond the binding binaries imposed by dominant discourses. As educators, counsellors, and allies, we need to join in this inventiveness and attune our ears to women's linguistic engineering so that articulations of trouble are not missed or unheard.

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Appendix I

Transcript notation

Punctuation marks .,?!=are used to mark speech rather than grammar. A period indicates a stopping fall in tone; a comma indicates a continuing intonation; a question mark indicates a rising inflection; an exclamation point indicates an animated or emphatic tone.

word=Italics are used to indicate speech of the interviewer

[. . .]=Square brackets enclosing three periods denotes the deletion of a short section of text

. . .=Three periods indicate a discernible pause. More periods prolong the pause

–=A dash shows a sharp cutoff of speech

: =A colon indicates an extension of the sound it follows.
More colons prolong the stretch

= Underlining indicates that words are uttered with added emphasis

() = Double round brackets enclose the transcriber's description of non-speech sounds or other features of the talk or scene

(hh) = Inserted within words to indicate laughter